

## Explorations of Fur Trappers

Coos Bay was a remote estuary lying far from the major currents of North Pacific exploration and overland travel. Tucked into the broad shoreline of Oregon and the ravines of the Coast Range, it was not on any primary route of travel nor a place of particular magnetism or interest until the 1850s. Coos Bay lay distant and isolated from the Willamette Valley and the navigable estuary of the Columbia River. It was little known except to the Coos Indians who had occupied its margins for centuries.

In the 1820s the first Euro-Americans explored the shores of Coos Bay. On October 25, 1826, Alexander Roderick McLeod of the Hudson's Bay Company brought his brigade south from the Umpqua watershed. McLeod recorded his arrival on northern edge of the bay:

Past a restless night; the rain fell so heavily that we had to lose time in the morning to put our arms in order, after which we continued our Journey about seven miles to a river or rather an inlet, the discharge of several rivers, the most noted is of no great magnitude, the main Channel running into the Ocean is about a mile broad.

The fur trappers bartered with the Indians for salmon and moved south along the North Spit. McLeod wrote that his men "past the night about three miles short of the Ocean, a short distance to the Southward of where we first made the river. The loose sand heaped by the violence of the wind, proved very fatiguing to the men who had burthens to carry." McLeod's party crossed to the east side of the bay by employing local Indians with their canoes, moved along the shoreline to South Slough, and hiked through the forested hills to the beach near the mouth of the Coquille River (Davies and Johnson 1961:186-187).

On July 9, 1828, the fur-trapping expedition of Jedediah Smith arrived at Coos Bay, having traveled overland from the Klamath River in California. The following day the party engaged canoes from the Indians and crossed to the North Spit. Harrison Rogers, a member of the expedition, wrote: "The river we crossed today unites with the one we crossed yesterday [at South Slough] and makes an extensive bay that runs back into the hills. It runs N. and S. or rather heads N.E. and enters the ocean S.W. at the entrance into the ocean it is about 1 1/2 miles wide" (Maloney 1940:318).

In these two instances fur trappers--the British party under Alexander Roderick McLeod and the American party under Jedediah Smith--passed over part of the North Spit. They were the first to write of its presence but neither found it noteworthy. Both, however, estimated the channel entrance into the ocean as a mile to a mile and a half wide. Their comments confirm that the North Spit was considerably shorter than its subsequent configuration when shaped by jetties and sand stabilization projects.